

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Bush's Iran-Contra Opportunity

I guess it wouldn't be a debate without that question, so let me say this: One of the things I've learned as Vice President, CIA director and ambassador is that the world out there is filled with detestable people, treacherous people. I'm not sure my opponent fully understands that from his experience in state government; the last Democratic President learned it after three years on the job.

People this mean don't go away because you tell them they're bad. You can't just refuse to shake hands, that doesn't get anything done. You don't often have the luxury of choosing between good and evil. The Iranians held hostages, and the Iraqis shot one of our ships and used poison gas. But the U.S. can't just walk away from the Persian Gulf; in the end our presence there helped move the two sides toward a truce, stopped a lot of killing and kept the oil lanes open for ourselves and our allies.

With experience in foreign policy, you learn that the real world is messy and hard, not clean and easy. Policies don't always work. Mistakes are inevitable. Decisions are tough and often painful. Certainly President Reagan's decision on shipping arms to Iran was one of the most difficult he had to face. I know because I was at his elbow. He knew, we knew, that the Ayatollah would not live forever, and that Iran is one of the most important countries in the Middle East. We knew opening some lines to Iran was in the national interest; now that the war is winding down nearly everyone agrees.

We hoped too that somebody in Iran could help us free the hostages held in Lebanon. The hostages were in the deepest plight, as the news media kept reporting. I don't know whether the Governor of Massachusetts ever has to meet with families of hostages, but I know that President Reagan's heart went out to them. There was a plan that I was supposed to meet with them so he didn't have to, but he wanted to do it himself.

And the consideration wasn't just human sympathy. At the time we couldn't tell anyone that one of the hostages was our CIA station chief in Beirut. I'm sure that no one else in this room has had the painful experience of watching the videotapes we obtained of William Buckley's ordeal—a year of beatings and worse, each one taking its toll, death finally when his lungs filled with fluid from being kicked in the kidneys.

And our national interests were directly involved. President Reagan *knew* that even the bravest man can't stand a year of torture, and we learned that the torturers had compiled a 400-page confession. Mr. Buckley was not just another agent; we needed a top person to put our intelligence

networks back together after their leaders were killed in the embassy bombing. Before he'd been sent, he'd been head of one of our most important intelligence programs back here; as former CIA director I can assure you it was highly sensitive, something we would never want our adversaries to know about. The lives of other intelligence agents were at risk, and our national intelligence capabilities, and ultimately the well-being of everyone listening tonight.

Those were the stakes. As I've said before, when I have the advantage of the same hindsight that critics do I see that a lot of mistakes were made. Maybe we reached out a little bit more in retrospect than we should have. But I'll hold up our foreign-policy record—Grenada, the Libyan bombings, the Soviet reversal in Afghanistan, the changes in China and the Soviet Union itself—against any other administration in recent history. Our Persian Gulf policy is a success. The Iranian arms shipment has been blown entirely out of proportion by people who didn't understand the high stakes involved, who don't understand the complexity of the world, and who have no understanding of the burden of presidential decision-making.

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal 18 _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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Any President will be second-guessed when something goes wrong, but he'll always be dealing with tough guys all around the world, and he had better have the understanding and experience to know what he's up against. A President shouldn't think he can deal with tough guys like little kids—locking them in their room when they're bad and rewarding them when they're good. That will get us more terrorism, more hostage-taking and maybe even wars. You can't rely on good faith in dealing with the Russians, the Ayatollah or the Iraqis or Noriega, or Jim Wright's friend Daniel Ortega.

Comandante Ortega. All the people working against the Contras seem to think that if only they're stopped, he'll hold elections and help the poor. But when the last Contra is killed, the Sandinistas will clamp their police state tighter and start to pick on their neighbors. And when we don't stand up to one bully, other bullies get worse.

Noriega, right next-door, just laughs. He sees that Congress wouldn't back us up on the Contras, so he doesn't worry that just maybe we might send the Marines. We've put sanctions on Panama, and I haven't heard anyone say what more we could do short of war. We've put Noriega under indictment here in the U.S. for drug-running. I don't know if we can catch him and put him in jail. But let me say this: If we ever do I promise never to give him a weekend furlough.